law or medicine, and to Italy to become connoisseurs of art and antiquities.

American women were largely excluded from advanced education, with the exception of female religious who joined nunneries in Canada or Louisiana and engaged in sustained study within convent walls. Instead, genteel daughters perfected womanly accomplishments like French (rather than Latin), needlework, and musicianship. Even relatively educated women including John Adams's wife Abigail and Benjamin Franklin's sister Jane—women who regularly read books and wrote letters—bemoaned their scant learning and poor spelling.

Yet women, like their brothers, sons, and husbands, were part of a burgeoning world of print in Anglo America. There were more than a thousand private libraries in seventeenth-century Virginia, some of them encompassing hundreds of volumes. In Boston, the Mather family's collection numbered several thousand titles by 1700. More than half of free white Marylanders owned books by the middle of the eighteenth century. Booksellers in cities and towns offered a wide selection of titles imported from England and an increasing number printed in the colonies. The number of newspapers grew rapidly as well. In 1720, only three journals were published in Anglo America. By 1770, there were thirty-one, printed in every colony from Massachusetts to Georgia. Those who could not afford to buy newspapers perused them in coffeehouses, and those who could not afford to buy books might read them in new civic institutions called libraries. Benjamin Franklin, a candlemaker's son who made his living as a printer, founded the Library Company of Philadelphia, the first subscription library in North America, in 1731. Works of fiction made up a large percentage of social library collections and numbered among the most highly circulated titles. One Philadelphia library served a nearly equal number of male and female readers.

Spreading through travel and print and polite conversation, the intellectual currents known as the Enlightenment deeply affected American provincials. Around 1650, some European thinkers began to analyze nature in order to determine the laws governing the universe. They conducted experiments to discover general principles underlying phenomena like the motions of planets, the behavior of falling objects, and the characteristics of light. Enlightenment philosophers sought knowledge through reason, taking particular delight in challenging previously unquestioned assumptions. John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), for example, disputed the notion that human beings are born already imprinted with innate ideas. All knowledge, Locke asserted, derives from one's observations of the external world. Belief in witchcraft and astrology, among other similar phenomena, thus came under attack.

The Enlightenment supplied educated Europeans and Americans with a common vocabulary and a unified worldview, one that insisted the enlightened eighteenth century was better, and wiser, than ages past. It joined them in a shared effort to make sense of God's orderly creation. American naturalists like John and William Bartram supplied European scientists with information about new world plants and animals for newly formulated universal classification systems. So, too, Americans interested in astronomy took part in an international project to learn about the solar system by studying a rare occurrence, the transit of Venus across the face of the sun in 1769. A prime example of America's participation in the Enlightenment was Benjamin Franklin, who retired from his successful printing business in 1748 when he was just forty-two, thereafter devoting himself to scientific experimentation and public service. His *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (1751) established the terminology and basic theory of electricity still used today.

Enlightenment rationalism affected politics as well as science. Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1692) and other works by French and Scottish philosophers challenged previous concepts of a divinely sanctioned, hierarchical political order originating in the power of fathers over families. Men created governments and so could alter them, Locke declared. A ruler who broke the social contract and failed to protect people's rights could legitimately be ousted by peaceful—or even violent—means. Government should promote the good of the people, Enlightenment theorists proclaimed. A proper political order could prevent the rise of tyrants; God's natural laws governed even monarchs. The rough and tumble political philosophy Dr. Hamilton found on his 1744 journey through the colonies offers evidence of a vernacular Enlightenment bubbling up from the lower orders as well.

**A Changing Religious Culture**

Religious observance was perhaps the most pervasive facet of eighteenth-century provincial culture. In Congregational (Puritan) churches, church leaders assigned seating to reflect standing in the community. By the mid-eighteenth century, wealthy men and their wives sat in privately owned pews; children, servants, slaves, and the less fortunate still sat in sex-segregated fashion in the rear, sides, or balcony of the church. Seating in Virginia's Church of England parishes also mirrored the local status hierarchy. In Quebec City, formal processions of men into the parish church celebrated Catholic feast days; each participant's rank determined his place in the procession. By contrast, Quaker meetinghouses
in Pennsylvania and elsewhere used an egalitarian but sex-segregated seating system. The varying rituals surrounding colonial churches symbolized believers’ place in society and the values of the community.

While such aspects of Anglo-American religious practice reflected traditions of long standing, the religious culture of the colonies began to change significantly in the mid-eighteenth century. From the mid-1730s through the 1760s, waves of revivalism—today known collectively as the First Great Awakening—swept over British America, especially New England (1735–1745) and Virginia (1750s–1760s). In the colonies as in Europe, orthodox Calvinists sought to combat Enlightenment rationalism, which denied innate human depravity. Simultaneously, the uncertainty accompanying King George’s War made colonists receptive to evangelists’ messages. Moreover, many recent immigrants and residents of the backcountry had no strong religious affiliation, thus presenting evangelists with numerous potential converts.

America’s revivals began in New England. In the mid-1730s, the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, a noted preacher and theologian, observed a remarkable reaction among the youthful members of his church in Northampton, Massachusetts, to sermons based squarely on Calvinist principles. Sinners could attain salvation, Edwards preached, only by recognizing their depraved nature and surrendering completely to God’s will. Moved by this message, parishioners of both sexes experienced an intensely emotional release from sin, which came to be seen as a moment of conversion, a new birth.

Such ecstatic conversions remained isolated until 1739, when George Whitefield, an Anglican clergyman already celebrated for leading revivals in Britain, crossed the Atlantic. For fifteen months, he toured the British colonies, concentrating his efforts in the major cities: Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, Charles Town, and Savannah. One historian has termed Whitefield “the first modern celebrity” because of his skillful self-promotion. Everywhere he traveled, his fame preceded him. Readers snapped up books by and about him, and newspapers advertised his upcoming appearances and hawked portrait engravings of his famous face. Thousands of free and enslaved folk turned out to listen—and to experience conversion. Whitefield’s preaching tour, the first such ever undertaken, created new interconnections among far-flung colonies.

Established clerics initially welcomed Whitefield and the American-born itinerant evangelist preachers who imitated him. Soon, however, many clergymen began to realize that, although “revived” religion filled their churches, it challenged their approach to doctrine and practice. They disliked the emotional style of the revivalists, whose itinerancy also disrupted normal patterns of church attendance. Particularly troublesome to the orthodox were the dozens of female exhorters who took to streets and pulpits, proclaiming their right (even duty) to expound God’s word.

Opposition to the Awakening mounted rapidly, causing congregations to splinter. “Old Lights”—orthodox clergymen and their followers—engaged in bitter disputes with “New Light” evangelicals. Already characterized by numerous sects, American Protestantism fragmented further as Congregationalists and Presbyterians split into factions, and as new evangelical groups—Methodists and Baptists—gained adherents. After 1771, Methodists sent “circuit riders” (preachers on horseback) to the far reaches of settlement, where they achieved widespread success in converting frontier dwellers. Paradoxically, the proliferation of distinct denominations eventually fostered a willingness to tolerate religious pluralism. Where no sect could monopolize orthodoxy, denominations had to coexist if they were to exist at all.

The Awakening challenged traditional modes of thought. Itinerants offered a spiritual variant of the choices colonists found in the world of goods. Revivalists’ emphasis on emotion over learning undermined received wisdom about society and politics as well as religion. Some New Lights began to defend the rights of groups and individuals to dissent from a community consensus, thereby challenging one of the fundamental tenets of colonial political life.

The egalitarian themes of the Awakening tended to attract ordinary folk and repel the elite. Nowhere was this trend more evident than in Virginia, where taxes supported the established Church of England, and the plantation gentry dominated society. By the 1760s, Baptists had gained a secure foothold in Virginia; inevitably, their beliefs and behavior clashed with the refined lifestyle of the gentry.

Virginia Baptists

Strikingly, almost all Virginia Baptist congregations included both free and enslaved members, and some congregations had African American majorities. Church rules applied equally to all members; interracial sexual relationships, divorce, and adultery were proscribed for all. In addition, congregations forbade masters’ breaking up slave couples through sale. Yet it is easy to overstate the racial egalitarianism of Virginia evangelicals and the attractiveness of the new sects to black members. Masters censured for abusing their slaves were quickly readmitted to church fellowship. Even later in
This painting by John Collet shows the charismatic evangelist George Whitefield preaching out of doors in Britain, but the same scene would have been repeated many times in the colonies, especially after the clergy of established churches denied him access to their pulpits, deeming him too radical for their liking. Note the swooning woman in the foreground; women were reputed to be especially susceptible to Whitefield’s message. Is the worker offering him a mug of ale derisively or devotedly? The answer is not clear, except that the gesture underscores the diversity of Whitefield’s audience—not all were genteel or middling folk.

the century, African Americans continued to make up a minuscule proportion of southern evangelicals—roughly 1 percent of the total.

The revivals of the mid-eighteenth century were not a dress rehearsal for Revolution. Still, the Great Awakening had important social and political consequences. In some ways, the evangelicals were profoundly conservative, preaching an old-style theology of original sin and divine revelation that ran counter to the Enlightenment’s emphasis on human perfectibility and reason. In other respects, the revivalists were recognizably modern, using the techniques of Atlantic commerce, and calling into question habitual modes of behavior in the secular as well as the religious realm.

Stability and Crisis at Midcentury

The spiritual foment of the Great Awakening points to the unsettled nature of provincial life in the mid-eighteenth century. A number of other crises—ethnic, racial, economic, and military—further exposed lines of fracture within North America’s diverse society. In the 1740s and 1750s, Britain expanded its claims to North American territory and to the obligations of provincials within the empire. At the same time, Anglo-American colonists—as veterans, citizens, and consumers—felt more strongly entitled to the liberties of British subjects. And Britain and France alike came to see North America as increasingly central to their economic, diplomatic, and military strategies in Europe.

Men from genteel families dominated the political structures in each province, for voters (free male property holders) tended to defer to their “betters” on election days. Throughout the Anglo-American colonies, these political leaders sought to increase the powers of elected assemblies relative to the powers of governors and other appointed officials. Colonial assemblies began to claim privileges associated with the British House of Commons, such as the rights to initiate tax legislation and to control the militia. The assemblies also developed ways of influencing Crown appointees, especially by threatening to withhold their salaries. In some colonies (Virginia and South Carolina, for example), members of the assembly presented a united front to royal officials, while in others (such as New York), provincials fought among

**Colonial Political Orders**